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ABSTRACT

Paralleling the growing use of the black community as a sociological laboratory, a movement for self-determination by blacks has been gaining momentum. Self determination is here defined as the power of black people to decide what should be researched in their community, why, and by whom, and the desire for it has grown because researchers generally: 1) use a common (middle class) frame of reference; 2) lack knowledge and consideration of the historical parameters that affect those researched; and, 3) fail to use obtained data for the betterment of the subjects. Much research is conducted in the black community that has no other function than to promote the social and economic interests of the researcher. The tradition of scientific racism, which began during the time of slavery to justify the status and treatment of blacks, is still being used to support erroneous assumptions about black people. The exploitation of blacks by white researchers can be diminished in several ways: 1) include blacks in the formulation and execution of research projects; 2) make the practical application of research results an integral part of research design; 3) compel researchers to inform the population of research results in understandable terms; and, 4) require white researchers to acquaint themselves with the black culture before attempting to conduct research. (JLB)

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RESEARCH IN THE BLACK COMMUNITY: A NEED FOR SELF-DETERMINATION[1]

Sandra J. Garcia, Angela Blackwell, Clyde E. Williams and Gary Simpkins

The black community has become a hunting ground for researchers, a living laboratory for experimentation on social problems. A definite pattern is followed by both the individual researcher and the team researcher attached to an institution: they use a common frame of reference, lack knowledge and consideration of the historical parameters that affect the behavior of the researched, and generally fail to use obtained data for the betterment of the subjects.

Within the black community, a movement for self-determination is gaining momentum. Black people are demanding control over the forces which affect their destinies. Blacks are showing increasing concern

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[1]Revised version of a paper presented at the Western Psychological Association Convention, June 21, 1969, Vancouver, British Columbia.

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over the misuse of research within their community; too often, topics selected for research are in no way related to their needs.

"Self-determination" is here defined as the power of black people to decide what should be researched in their community, why, and by whom.

Webster defines research as "investigation or experimentation aimed at the discovery and interpretation of facts, revision of accepted theories or laws in the light of new facts, or practical application of such new or revised theories or laws." But what passes for research in the black community is, all too often, the collection and perpetuation of falsehoods by persons who tenaciously hold to what they define as "truth"--that which they know to be true because they hold firmly to it. Further, new research is often nothing more than the rediscovery of old falsehoods and stereotypes, the repetition of which supports their supposed validity. Such myths are not only false, they are damaging to black people. Unfortunately, those who are most instrumental in this distortion of facts are often the most highly credentialed and influential people in our society.

The collection and repetition of falsehoods and myths about black people has a long history in this country. Since the beginning of the eighteenth century, the biological and social sciences have suffered from a preoccupation with research designed to establish and support various theories of race. For the most part this research has been racist; it has deliberately supported assumptions of the ruling majority. Its purpose has been to prove the superiority of some races and the inferiority of others.

Prior to the early 1700s Americans felt no need to formulate scientific theories accounting for alleged qualitative differences between ethnic groups. The first black people who came to this country were not slaves, but indentured servants whose status was the same as that of many of the first whites to arrive. Marriages between white and black indentured servants took place without fear of contaminating the "pure white race."[2] Actually it was not until slavery became an indispensible part of this country's economic survival that race theories became popular. They were needed to justify the status and treatment of blacks and Indians.[3]

Many methods have been used to classify and qualify the races. The first was based on "facial lineaments and body conformations."[4] The

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[2] L. Bennett, Jr. Before the Mayflower: A History of the Negro in American 1619-1964. Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1966, pp. 36-37.

[3] T. F. Gossett. Race: The History of an Idea in America. New York: Schocken Books, 1965, pp. 29-31.

[4] Ibid, p. 33.

next theory to gain recognition was based on skin color with "the white race as the norm."[5] Blumenbach collected crania from all over the world and developed a system of classification based on these specimens. He concluded that the Caucasian cranium was larger than the Ethiopian cranium, and therefore the Caucasian must be superior in intellect. Around the end of the eighteenth century an English physician introduced the idea of the "multiple origin of races." In his opinion, the Negro was "an intermediate species between the white man and the ape."[6] This argument of separate origin was used repeatedly, in later years, in defense of slavery. There were other theories based on hair type, size of sex organs, and climate. All of these theories attempted to explain character and cultural traits as hereditary and to support the assumption of white superiority.

The evolutionary theory of Charles Darwin had a great impact on contemporary theories of race. His work, however, did not discredit the notion that some races are superior to others. Darwin's theory was used to support the doctrine of white supremacy, since proponents of this doctrine could now claim that blacks were not as advanced in their evolutionary development as whites. The theory of biological evolution eventually led to theories of social evolution. These theories allowed racists to label not only people, but entire societies, as "primitive" or "backward."[7] Such theories were also used to justify immigration laws which discriminated against those peoples who were judged to be inferior. Later, with the advent of imperialistic expansion, race theories were used to justify the subjugation of people by force. Race theories added strength for those who preached the supremacy of Anglo-Saxons and their eventual "domination of the world."[8]

Theories of race have had no success in describing differences of character, temperament, and intelligence among peoples. For the most part these theories, many of which were frankly racist or else interpreted to support racist claims, have become tools for exploitation and discrimination. In the 1920s, attempts were made by scholars to discredit such racist theories. Unfortunately, however, the tradition of scientific racism is still being used to support erroneous assumptions about black people.

The best example of the continuation of this tradition into modern times may be seen in so-called compensatory education. Many studies

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[5]Ibid, p. 36.

[6]Ibid, p. 48.

[7]Ibid, pp. 67-73.

[8]Ibid, pp. 311-338.

have been conducted for the sole purpose of showing that the failure of our schools in the black community is due to the low educability of the black child. Whether the issue be one of genetics, diet of the mother, father's occupation, social class, or anything else perceived as affecting cognition, the doctrine of white supremacy is always detectable in this type of research. Often, there is no limit to the manipulating of data and the misuse of the scientific method to obtain significant results that will prove right those who are strongly committed to a particular hypothesis.

The work of Carl Bereiter and Siegfried Engelmann may be cited as a prime example of this misuse of the scientific method. They are advocating a theory of verbal deprivation as the reason for the failure of black children in school. For example, Bereiter and Engelmann write that, because of his lower class origins, the "disadvantaged" child "has not learned the language rules that are necessary for defining concepts, for drawing inferences; for asking questions, and for giving explanations."[9]

Bereiter and his associates are doing their best to convince teachers and other groups that black children have only a "primitive notion of the structure of language," that "the language of culturally deprived children...is not merely an underdeveloped version of standard English, but is a basically non-logical mode of expressive behavior" which consists primarily of gestures and "badly connected words or phrases." Furthermore, Bereiter and his colleagues claim that "culturally deprived children do not just think at an immature level: many of them do not think at all."[10]

William Labov, a linguist at Columbia University who has studied the language of lower class black youth extensively, has found that there is no factual basis for the verbal deprivation theories. Labov has shown conclusively that the language spoken by blacks is regular, systematic, and is by no means "primitive" or an "underdeveloped version of standard English." Further, in response to Bereiter and Engelmann's claim that the language of black children is "basically nonlogical," Labov points out that "If there is a failure of logic involved...it is surely in the approach of the verbal deprivation theorists, rather than in the mental abilities of the children concerned." Labov's position is

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[9] C. Bereiter & S. Engelmann. "Language Learning Activities for the Disadvantaged Child. ERIC ED 020 002, May 1968.

[10] C. Bereiter, S. Engelmann, Jean Osborn, & P. A. Reidford. "An Academically Oriented Pre-School for Culturally Deprived Children." In Fred M. Hechinger (Ed.), Pre-School Education Today: New Approaches to Teaching Three-, Four-, and Five-Year Olds, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966. pp. 105-135.

supported by tape recorded conversations in which black youths who speak "non-standard" English, and who were perceived as being slow learners by school personnel, present tightly reasoned arguments concerning the nature and existence of God. As Labov observes, "Bereiter and Engelmann, [Martin] Deutsch and [Arthur] Jensen are giving teachers a ready-made, theoretical basis for the prejudice they already feel against the lower-class Negro child and his language."[11]

The work of Bereiter, Engelmann, and their associates is typical of the approach the white researcher usually takes when studying the black community. If the white researcher perceives a need for change, he tries to obtain data that will help impose middle-class values upon blacks. As the sociologist Walter B. Miller has observed, the white researcher will use such terms as "the middle-class measuring rod" or the "core culture" as key terms in treating lower-class culture. This of course leads to a picture of the lower-class culture as a "defective variant or imperfect reflection of middle-class culture."

Miller continues:

> A further extrapolation from this starting position produces the view that the basic problem of the lower-class child is that of "coming to terms" with the "dominant" middle-class cultural system as exemplified and supported in the schools, courts, and social agencies.[12]

Many behavioral scientists speak of "cultural pluralism" when it is convenient to demonstrate a respect for the validity of differing ethnic traditions and values. In reality, however, pluralism exists in the mind of the researcher only in terms of polar extremes--the "normative" or middle class and the "deviant" or lower class. The researcher typically perceives only a need to discover ways in which to make the "deviant" normal.

In Webster's definition of research, the phrase "practical application of such new or revised theories or laws" best summarizes what blacks are referring to when they call for relevance. We all admire the "pure" researcher who seeks knowledge irrespective of its possible uses. Further, we all hold the freedom of scientific inquiry in high regard and would recoil from any suggestion that all research must be predicated upon its perceived effectiveness in curing social ills. It

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[11] W. Labov. "The Logic of Non-Standard English," to appear in Georgetown Monograph Series on Language and Linguistics, Monograph No. 22. Washington, D. C.: Georgetown University Press, 1969.

[12] W. B. Miller. "Implications of Urban Lower-Class Culture for Social Work." The Social Service Review, 1959, 33, pp. 219-236.

is well known that, whether "pure" or "applied," most research is, at best, able to bring about small advances. Only a very choice few of all researchers can ever be effective agents of change that will better their society. The point is that blacks are not making demands for instant cures of all their sociological and psychological problems. Rather, they are demanding self-determination in regard to research in the black community. Further, blacks are primarily concerned with applied research that is addressed to their immediate needs. There is little tolerance for the acquisition of knowledge for knowledge's sake while critical social problems remain unsolved.

A great deal of research is conducted in the black community that has no other function than to promote the social and economic interests of the researcher.[13] Such research is worse than useless because the economic deprivation of one segment of the population is used to advance the economic interests of another. This exploitation of blacks by white researchers can be diminished in several ways. Of first importance is the requirement that blacks be included in the formulation and execution of research projects. Because of the uniqueness of the black experience, blacks are by far the best qualified people to delineate their own needs and goals. Blacks do not shun the expertise of white professionals; in fact, they welcome it. However, white researchers cannot determine the research problems because most whites are totally unfamiliar with the black experience. Furthermore, the perception of whites is tainted by racist attitudes permeating the entire society. The presence of black people on white research projects would make less likely the racist use of the scientific method discussed earlier.

Second, services should be an integral part of research. Facts and figures are of no value in themselves. Thus, researchers must be willing to determine, as part of their initial research design, how the results of their research can be of use to their subjects. Blacks should, of course, be instrumental in this decision.

Too often, research findings are not used at all. They are not used by whites because whites never intended to use their data to benefit those who were researched. Results are not used by blacks for several reasons. Often these results are either not made available to blacks or they are stated in such technical jargon that no use can be made of them. Researchers should be compelled to inform the population of the results of research in terms they can understand. Research findings should not only be reported in esoteric professional journals, but to the layman as well. Provided with information that they can understand, black people can and will begin to view problems as matters which they can do something about.

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[13] C. W. Thomas "Boys no more: Some Social Psychological Aspects of the New Black Ethic." The American Behaviorial Scientist, 1969, 12, pp. 38-42.

Finally, white researchers should try to acquaint themselves with the values, customs, and other psychological and sociological variables of blacks before attempting to conduct research. It is not difficult for the white researcher to become acquainted with the black experience; there already exists a large literature on this subject. The white researcher has no choice but to discover all that he can, or face open hostility and rejection from those he hopes to study.

In conclusion, black and white scholars involved in social research must challenge the centuries-old misuse of knowledge and power. New research, as well as the reinterpretation of research done in the past, should be based upon a new perspective; a perspective that uses the scientific method to effect advances in society, rather than to subjugate and dehumanize.